

A blueprint for taking leadership on climate change

Tom Lantos

Tuesday, June 5, 2007

If you have not been blitzed with a media onslaught about global warming, then perhaps you have been hiding in the increasingly shrinking Arctic. But with all of the hand-wringing and alarm, including some token PR efforts by the White House during the past few days, the United States is at the back of the pack on this issue of existential urgency. This week's G-8 summit is a perfect opportunity to raise our voices, but the Bush administration seems intent on sending a muted message.

Its only significant action on the matter has been to undermine international cooperation. The Bush administration has sent mid-level diplomats to international meetings with a simple mandate: deny, obfuscate and stall.

In the last few days, the White House added "frustrate" to that list by announcing a half-baked scheme with no teeth and no real strategy. The Bush administration has been dragged kicking and screaming into the climate change debate. Now it says each nation should develop targets, but the targets would not be binding or mandatory. And it insists that we should implement new energy technologies around the world, but offers no concrete notion on how to do it.

Congress will not allow this smokescreen to consume all the oxygen on the issue. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is committed to addressing climate change now. She has mandated that all relevant committees submit climate-change legislation this summer.

As part of that effort, the House Foreign Affairs Committee has just approved HR2420, which I co-sponsored with Reps. Chris Smith, R-N.J., and Ed Markey, D-Mass. It finally brings the United States to the table on climate change to deliver more than just lip service. Unlike the Bush administration's plan, the bill has binding targets and workable methods, such as a cap-and-trade system, to get there. And unlike the Bush administration's plan, the legislation includes specific strategies to engage India, China and other major polluting countries on an ongoing basis to come to an agreement. The House of Representatives will soon consider this timely bill.

The European Union has instituted a cap-and-trade system, and some individual countries and U.S. states are making strides to reduce their carbon emissions, but the United States must take a leadership role. HR2420 mandates a diplomatic blueprint for the Bush administration to follow in 2007, requiring it send Cabinet-level officials to partner with Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon's special envoys on climate change and to use the United Nation's framework on climate change. This dialogue would kick start a series of climate summits with the key players, beginning with the G-8 meeting this week and then at the U.N. General Assembly meeting in September, leading up to the critical U.N. meeting on climate in Indonesia in December.

The purpose of this diplomatic push is to launch serious and potentially final negotiations in Indonesia on a comprehensive and binding global agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol. Our legislation stipulates the elements that such an agreement must have to save the Earth from a climate meltdown: a scientifically viable target for stabilizing carbon-dioxide concentration in the Earth's atmosphere; binding emissions reduction targets; flexible mechanisms such as carbon trading to make the agreement workable; a comprehensive approach that enhances carbon sinks by managing land use and forests; and technological cooperation.

The key word, of course, is "binding" -- in the end, we must all sign on the dotted line. We hope the president is ready to be serious about this dire issue by accepting and encouraging binding global targets. It seems that he is trying to avoid this prospect by presenting a watered-down plan simply to pre-empt criticism, specifically at the upcoming G-8 summit.

The good news is that because of the hard work of scientists, innovators and entrepreneurs around the world, the technology we need is available: to replace fossil-fuel consumption with an array of renewable energy sources, to cut down on unnecessary travel, to retrofit buildings, to engage in carbon capture at coal-burning plants, to make our homes much more efficient and to raise Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards for vehicles.

Now all we need is the governmental incentives and regulations to accelerate the implementation of these technologies for serious carbon-dioxide emission reduction. And for that, we need the will. In that regard, I hope the United States can go from the back of the pack to the front, and I aim for this Congress to make it happen this year.

Tom Lantos represents San Mateo and part of San Francisco in the U.S. House of Representatives and is chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.